

# what's up?

### What's it all about?

One of the passages of adolescence is the development and understanding of sexuality. This includes understanding one's body, gender identity, sexual orientation, and values about sexual activity. During adolescence, many teens begin to explore their sexuality.

For all teens, this is a challenging transition. But for teens who are questioning their sexual orientation, or who identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, this can be a very lonely, difficult and threatening transition. It can also be a difficult time for parents, who may have fears and questions of their own. It is crucial for teens to get support and understanding from their peers, parents and other adults when they have questions about sexual orientation.

### Why does it matter?

**It is a matter of emotional health, physical health and safety:**

- The experience of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens can be one of isolation, fear of prejudice and lack of peer or family support.
- Gay and lesbian youth have higher rates of suicide attempts. Up to 30% of gay and bisexual adolescent males say they have attempted suicide at least once. Some of the increased risk may be due to societal or family rejection of gay youth.
- Youth who report same-sex or both-sex romantic attraction are more likely to experience extreme forms of violence than youth who report heterosexual attraction.
- Homosexual and bisexual adolescents are at greater risk for STIs, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancies, suicide and earlier onset of heterosexual intercourse than their heterosexual peers.

### What are the details?

- Exploration with partners of both sexes is a natural part of growing up for many youth.
- How one's sexual orientation is determined is unknown. It develops across a person's lifetime. Most experts agree that homosexuality is not caused by trauma, imitation of homosexual people, bad heterosexual experiences, sex role nonconformity, rape and sexual abuse.
- Sexual orientation is one component of a person's identity. Sexual orientation is defined by a person's feelings, not the type of sexual behavior he or she chooses to engage in.
- "Coming out" is a process of understanding and deciding not to hide one's sexual orientation.
- In a survey of Seattle teens, 91% said they were heterosexual, 4% said they were bisexual, 1% said they were homosexual and 4% said they were not sure.
- A transgendered person is someone whose gender identity (someone's internal sense of being male or female) differs from the traditional expectations for their physical sex. They may be gay, straight, or bisexual.
- Homophobia—an intense or irrational fear or hatred of gays and lesbians—may make it very difficult for gay teens to feel safe, to express their feelings or to seek help.

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

### What can I do?

If you are a parent who thinks your son or daughter is dealing with issues about their sexual orientation, there are groups and resources that can help, such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Their Web site offers parents tips on how to talk to teens about sexual orientation, how to support teens, and how to support yourself.

Find out about peer support groups for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens, that are facilitated by trained adults. These groups can help teens cope with isolation and fears and help prevent high-risk behaviors.

Make sure the schools in your area enforce policies to protect all students from verbal and physical harassment and abuse by other students and staff.

### What do teens need from me?

- Be aware of your own biases and prejudices about this topic before you talk with a young person.
- Make sure teens know that no one has the right to harass, threaten or hurt them because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They need to tell a trusted adult if this ever happens.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth need to know that they are not alone, and that they are loved, accepted and valued.
- Teens don't have to "come out" if they don't feel ready or safe.
- Provide accurate information about sexual orientation to dispel stereotypes about gay, lesbian and bisexual sexuality.
- All young people need information that will help them protect their sexual health. Postponing sexual activity is good advice for all teens, no matter what their sexual orientation.
- Be prepared with accurate information to help teens understand their bodies and manage their feelings.

#### Adults can help teens develop:

- Communication skills so they can talk with partners, friends and family members.
- Self-esteem to cope with homophobia and guard against peer pressures and engaging in sexual activity before they are ready.
- A network of supportive friends, family, and professionals so they are loved and protected.

**hot  
links!**

**Gay and Lesbian National Hotline** 1-888-843-4564; [www.glnh.org](http://www.glnh.org)

Peer counselors available M-F evenings

**Stonewall Youth** 360-705-2738; [www.stonewallyouth.org](http://www.stonewallyouth.org)

This Olympia peer support group has outreach projects in Lewis, Mason and Grays Harbor counties

**Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays** [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

**Safe Schools Coalition of Washington** 1-888-307-9275 [www.safeschools-wa.org](http://www.safeschools-wa.org)

Resource guide has contact information for youth support groups in Washington

**Out Proud** [www.outproud.org](http://www.outproud.org)

**National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth**

**Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States** [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

**Lambert House Seattle** [www.lamberthouse.org](http://www.lamberthouse.org)

**Bureau for At-Risk Youth** 1-800-99Youth (1-800-999-6884); [www.guidancechannel.com](http://www.guidancechannel.com)  
"How to Talk to Children About Sex"

Washington State Department of Health  
DOH Pub 910-112 11/2003  
[www.doh.wa.gov](http://www.doh.wa.gov)

Resources listed here are provided as a public service and do not imply endorsement by the State of Washington.

References for source materials are available from the Child and Adolescent Health program, 360-236-3547.

For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. Please call 1-800-525-0127.



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Office of Health Promotion

P.O. Box 47833 Olympia, WA 98504-7833

(360) 236-3736

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